

The Elders' Verses I: *Theragāthā*. Translated with introduction and notes by K.R. Norman
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Book Review pp. 587-9

The old order changeth yielding place to new. K.R.Norman's ELDERS' VERSES I has taken its place in Pali Text Society Translation Series, displacing Mrs. Rhys Davids' pioneer work, *Psalms of the Brethren*, of 1913. In the preface to his work, Norman makes the following observations regarding the earlier edition.

' Furthermore, that translation was made at a time when Buddhist studies in Europe had not made the progress they have today, when a number of texts containing parallel passages had not been published, when a critical edition of Dhammapala's Commentary on Theragāthā had not appeared, and when many other valuable aids to translation, including dictionaries and grammars were not yet available '. (p. vii)

Even a cursory glance through the ELDERS' VERSES I reveals the fact that Norman has conscientiously made use of these aids and has produced a work of considerable merit which is to be commended on many counts. His introduction which runs into 64 pages is very methodically divided under nine heads. He has made a thorough study of the metres found in Theragāthā and has been able to correct Mrs. Rhys Davids in many places and fill up many gaps regarding her identification of metres. At the end of the translation and notes he has added an Index of Pallel Passages, Index of Names and Index of Words Discussed or Quoted in the Notes. To students of further research in the field these can be of immense value.

Through his familiarity with Pali canonical and commentarial literature

Norman provides a wealth of notes on Pali grammar and syntax which would serve as a supplement to any treatise on the Pali language. To the works of pioneers in the field like Oldenberg, Mrs. Rhys Davids, Woodward and Geiger it is a useful appendix.

Aided by his knowledge of Pali metre and the information furnished by scholars like Brough, Warder and Alsdorf on Pali and Prakrits, Norman also attempts in a number of instances to reconstruct the text. He says that he does this with caution. ' It is probable that the authors of Thag. had different ideas about this, and we should accordingly be very careful about correcting on metrical grounds alone' (p.137). Norman further reveals the nature and scope of his work in the following. ' Since my interests are largely lexical and grammatical I have quoted at length from Dhammapala's cty. any information which seems to augment or contradict dictionary entries, and I have drawn attention to errors and omissions in PED, PTC, and CPD. I have also discussed metrical and phonological points where they help to decide the original form of the verse, or give aid in the translation or interpretation'. (p.xxxiii). While we are satisfied that he has, by this method, quite successfully explored new territories. it is evident that on more than one occasion he has been tossed on high seas.

In the translation of v.72 his attempt to give a new meaning to *dunnikkhamo* as ' hard to trample down ' (Mrs. Rhys Davids' translation is ' can scarce emerge ') has resulted, in our opinion, in a perfect massacre of the simile. Here is Norman's translation. ' Just as a young bamboo is hard to trample down when its tip has grown, and it has developed hard wood, so I find it hard to go forth because of the wife who has been brought home '. With all the labour of the notes written on this, it is a forced alignment that is made to appear between ' hard to tread down ' and ' having a difficult departure ' (p.140). Anyone who is familiar with the growth of bamboos would appreciate the accuracy with which the Commentary explains this simile. The Cty. does not, as Norman does, force the word *dunnikkhamo* to give a new meaning, as though the word were spelt

dunnikkamo. It also explains *pasākhajāto* in its literal and natural meaning of 'with branches grown, inter-twining themselves'. The equivalent for this in Norman's translation, one has to find in 'it has developed hard wood'. The idea of the simile is, as far as we can discern, that a bamboo as it is allowed to grow into maturity, increases its branches at the top (= *vaddhitaggo*) and spreads itself out (= *pasākhajāto*), so that even if it were cut at the root it is no mean task to take it clear out of the bush. Here Mrs. Rhys Davids, with her 'can scarce emerge' is obviously nearer the tradition and nearer the truth.

At v. 511 he goes further to suggest that *sirim* is a mistake for *siraṃ* (p.202f.) This is a complete textual transplanting. The authority on which he does so is to be discovered from his notes on vv. 16 and 511. The result, according to him, is: 'we should translate "who would bow down his head with his hands and feet", i.e. perform a *pañcaṅga-praṇāma*. cf. *añjaliṃ paṇāmetvā* Thig. 431 and *nataṭṭirā* Divy 455' (p.203). I must confess that although I am familiar with the use of *pañcapaṭiṭṭhita* as a form of *vandanā* in Pali literature, this is the first time I witness the performance of such an act, viz. *siraṃ hatthehi pādehi yo paṇāmeyya āgataṃ*. Norman translates this as: 'who bowed down his head with hands and feet, worshipping ...'. Does this mean that the man bends his head as well as his hands and feet or that he uses his hands and feet to bend his head down? The explanation of the Commentary on this are thought to be not completely satisfactory. However the text, even without the Commentary, would normally yield a translation like this.

"Would a person, (beating) with his hands and feet, drive away the Goddess of Fortune who has come to him? It is such a man who, having come across a teacher like this would not make the best use of him (= would not avail himself of the opportunity)".

Having corrected the text in this manner, Norman has suggested correcting the PED too, and leans on Skt. (MW) for some of his extracted meanings.

If examples like these are to be considered, they are then errors of commission and construction, and in a new translation which comes after over fifty years, are to be specially guarded against. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that Norman gives us, on the whole, ' a literal translation, almost word for word ' in which he has avoided ' poetic and archaic English words ' (p.xxxii).

The limits set upon the reviewer does not make it possible to point out other instances where greater care in understanding the Commentarial notes, caution in accepting the readings in the texts and discretion in the application of principles of linguistic phenomena are yet to be desired.

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